

"WHAT DOES IT COST TO BELONG TO YOUR CHURCH?"
Luke 9:57-62 23-25
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What does it cost to belong to your church? | Has anyone ever asked you that question? People have put ~~that~~ ^{the} question to me in various forms: sometimes circuitously, ("What is your policy on giving to the Church, Reverend? | How much does the Church expect us to contribute? ") And sometimes it comes directly: ("What's this going to cost me?")

The people who ask the question in that direct, no-nonsense manner are always prospective members, and they betray immediately their lack of experience with the institutional church. | They have not yet learned that minimal ecclesiastical etiquette dictates against calling a spade a spade, as it were - in many areas but particularly when it comes to money. | They have not yet learned the sacred vocabulary of "Stewardship" that collection of pious euphemisms with which the church triumphant gets down on its knees every autumn to beg the flock to cough up enough money so that the fuel bill can be paid. | When people ask so brazenly, ["What's this going to cost?"] they betray immediately their ignorance about the way the church salves its own conscience with some fancy theological footwork: | namely, the idea that the Holy Spirit fosters spiritual growth and that if we manage to make it easy enough for a man to get inside the fold, God will, in time, bring him to the point of meaningful sacrificial giving.

In any case, whenever someone is so bold as to ask me directly, ["What's it cost to belong to your church?"], I'm momentarily stopped in my tracks. | And I do what I expect you would do - or have done: I hem and haw a bit: I rephrase the question in more palatable terms of the annual budget, and pledge techniques. | In so many words I say that the church will gratefully receive whatever you think you can afford, which is simply another way of saying that there is no cost at all. | The trouble is, that is profoundly untrue and worse - it is directly contrary to what we know about the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Take our New Testament Lesson this morning, for instance. | Jesus, ^{at Gethsemane} if you will pardon the disrespectful analogy, had three prospective members. | He was on his way to Jerusalem. The price he would pay for his commitment was becoming clearer by the minute. | He knew what was waiting for him in the Capital city and he had made his decision to push on regardless.

It is in this context, then, that we watch in amazement as he deals with the three

PROSPECTS. The first man was a volunteer: Matthew's account of the incident indicates that the man was a scribe, an ecclesiastical lawyer, whose job it was to copy and interpret the Mosaic law. He volunteered; he wanted to join. Caught up in the spirit of the moment he said, "I will follow you wherever you go." and Jesus told him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." That is, Jesus moderated that man's spontaneous enthusiasm by laying out before him the cost. Men need the sustaining comfort of a home, and in all integrity - at that moment in time as he walked toward Jerusalem, Jesus could not promise even that. To follow him at that moment meant to pay a rather dear price.

The second prospect was called. Jesus found him in the crowd, looked him in the face and with that characteristic bluntness said, "Follow me". The man was not unwilling but he had business to attend to first. "Let me go first and bury my father." In fact, there was a clear moral and legal imperative involved here. A son was responsible for the necessary duty. And Jesus said, "^{Learn}~~Love~~ the dead to bury the dead: as for you, go and proclaim the Kingdom of God."

A third man stepped forward, perhaps having overheard what transpired between Jesus and the other two. He, too, was willing. He too, was moved by this brave and lonely man walking into the jaws of danger. "I'll come along, Lord - in a minute, just as soon as I say good-bye to my family - I'll be there - wait for me?" And Jesus said, "No one who sets his hand to the plow and keeps looking back is fit for the Kingdom of God."

What's going on here? Three prospects - no members. Jesus was either terribly impractical, untutored in the fine art of member recruitment; or he was callous to the understandable human needs of these three men; or else he was at this point - and remember that the stakes were getting higher with every step he took in the direction of Jerusalem - teaching something very fundamental and essential about Christian Faith. I believe it is the latter. I believe Jesus was defining faith as following, and following as a radical obedience to him in a particular situation that would prove to be very costly.

I believe he was laying the foundation for that position earlier when he told his disciples: "If a man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it: and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it." (Luke 9:23-24)

"What does it cost to belong?" The answer Jesus consistently gave was, "Everything: everything you have: you must lose your life, figuratively speaking, ~~that~~^{you} there are occasion when that will happen literally."

Now, there is a considerable gap between that and the modus operandi of the institutional church; this one or any one. Part of the reason, as I intimated in my introduction, is political or pragmatic. The church is an institution with a building and program to maintain, a professional staff to pay, and it is therefore completely and finally dependent on the voluntary contributions of its members if it is to survive. Therefore it is not prudent to make belonging to the church so demanding that people will not join. Put as plainly as I know how, it may feel better theologically to recruit one soul who will give \$25.00 per week: ^{and lay down his life} but practically the institution functions better with 10 souls giving \$5.00 per week. ^{who will come to worship occasionally}

But that's just part of the reason. The other part is honestly Biblical - or at least it starts out that way. Last Wednesday was the anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. On October 31, 1517, an Augustinian Monk by the name of Martin Luther marched up to the Castle Church in Wittenburg, Germany and nailed a list of theses on the door. Running through those 99 statements was the theology of Grace as Luther had rediscovered it in the New Testament; a theology which, in his estimation, was contradicted totally by the practice of his own Roman Church. To be precise, Luther was captivated by the Gospel which told him that in Jesus Christ God has given his love to mankind freely, with no strings attached; that God's love for a man does not depend on the goodness of that man, nor is it possible for the man to cause God to love him more by doing good works. The name for it is "Grace," and Luther perceived that the venerable institution of the church had been moving in the opposite direction for centuries. God's love had been shackled by the church and the clergy. God's grace had been expropriated by the Church, and was distributed to men in exchange for their conforming to the rules and rituals of the Church. Thus the life of a Christian became the process by which a man literally earned God's love by doing what the Church told him to do: attending mass, making pilgrimages, going to confession, doing penance. The last straw for Luther was the sale of indulgences: issued by the pope, sold throughout the Holy Roman Empire: the purchase of which earned a man a certain amount of righteousness - which in turn lessened the amount of time to be spent in purgatory. You could buy one for your relatives - a kind of posthumous gift certificate: for yourself - a spiritual savings account.

In any case, the sale of indulgences typified the theology of the church which Luther correctly identified as the opposite of the Good News of the Gospel. So the Reformation happened philosophically dependent on grace as the heart of the Gospel. Over in Geneva, Switzerland, an exiled French scholar by the name of John Calvin worked it out rationaly in a mammoth and brilliant theological work under the title "The Institutes of the Christian Religion", in which he said over and over again that God comes to man, God saves man, God awakens faith in man. God's primary characteristic is his grace - his unmerited and totally free love.

And so Protestants dig their heels in a little bit anytime they hear something that sounds like the Church attaching conditions to God's love. And what Protestants notoriously forget is that the Reformers themselves had already paid dearly as they were working out the theology of grace. Luther ^{was} excommunicated by his church and branded as a criminal. Calvin was an exile from his native land and also a criminal. It would have been totally alive to these men to suggest that faith is not costly. The grace of God has no price tag, but Christian discipleship does. Jesus had been candid about the cost, and these men had been paying for it daily.

Thus, we are correct when we refuse to see giving money to the church, or doing anything, as the way we earn God's love. But we are wrong, absolutely wrong, when we push that theology beyond the breaking point and conclude that Christian discipleship costs nothing. There is no price tag on the love of God: it has already been paid: the crucifixion of God's own son took care of that. But there most certainly is a price tag on Christian faith, if that faith is a matter of following Jesus Christ.

That's the dilemma of the church. We are commissioned to announce the very good news of God's love: and we are commissioned in the name of Jesus Christ to call men to discipleship, the very costly business of following him. Both at the same time.

In a pointed little book "Servants and Stewards" Arthur McCary quotes the favorite hymn: "Take thou our selves dear Lord, heart, mind, and will. Through our surrendered souls, thy plan fulfill. We yield ourselves to thee, time talents, all. We hear and henceforth heed, thy sovereign call." And then he goes on to speculate about the thoughts of a churchman, leaving the sanctuary, having just sung that hymn: "Look God, I didn't mean that literally. I can give some praise if there's nothing more directly related to my interests that I must do. I can spend an occasional hour in worship - from time to time, but it isn't always convenient. But God, what I'm really looking for is bargain basement religion....I'd like to accept the unconditional offer of love that I see in Jesus Christ. I'm willing to receive as much as you can give. But

God, I just don't have time to match your faithfulness with my own. I'm ~~XX~~ looking for religion at a discount."

You see, in the final analysis, that's where it comes to rest. The church ends up selling discount religion. In our dual anxiety not to make religion so demanding that the church goes broke, and to remain faithful to the theology of grace, we end up telling people that it doesn't really matter; it doesn't cost a thing.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in a phrase which is now famous, called it "cheap grace." ["Cheap grace," he wrote, "is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism with church discipline, communion without confession." Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate." (The Cost of Discipleship. P. 36)

That is the final and really irony. If we buy cheap religion - we get what ~~XXXX~~ we pay for, and we're no longer talking about money here. We are now dealing with discipleship - the happy, liberating, exhilarating knowledge that I am loved of God, and some of God's will for his creation is being done through my life. The final irony is that ~~cheap~~ cheap grace - when we allow it to characterize our church - and our churchmanship - is a little like cheating on a test under the honor system. We may pass the test and never be caught, but we will have denied ourselves the deep satisfaction of having done a job well; of having submitted to the discipline of learning and growing.

For several years after my ordination I was very taken with the theology of stewardship. I used to think that Christian Discipleship for most of us really boiled down to making a sacrificial pledge to the Church. But after a decade of going through this ritual every year, saying all the words, using all the right methods, and then realizing that for most of us we're talking about 2 or 3 or maybe 5 percent of our income, I'm becoming reluctant even to use the word "stewardship" anymore. It may be the most misleading euphemism in all our repetoire. And so I'm not going to do what I'm supposed to do at this point. I'm not going to ask you to pledge generously, because - once again - experience has taught me that most of you have already decided what you are going to do.

What I am asking this morning is that you share some of my impatience with cheap grace and discount religion; that you think seriously about the call of Jesus Christ as it has come to you to be his disciple; that you think seriously now, but beyond this hour, about his words:

WHAT DOES IT COST TO BELONG TO YOUR CHURCH?"

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"Whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it."] that you open a window in your life -
a window ^{perhaps} that has been closed - through which may pass God's unending love for you, and your
response, your faith, your discipleship. AMEN

Father, forgive us for cheapening what is so costly to you. Open us to a fresh and new realization of your love: and then stand with us, support us, as we follow - Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN